

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NIC-01 SAJ-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-05

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R 091502Z DEC 74

FM AMEMBASSY PRAGUE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7359

INFO AMEMBASSY BELGRADE

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST

AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY SOFIA

AMEMBASSY WARSAW

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, CZ

SUBJECT: FUNERAL OF MRS. BENES

REF: PRAGUE A-119

1. MRS. HANA BENESOVA, WIDOW OF THE SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC, DIED ON DECEMBER 1 AT THE AGE OF 89. ALTHOUGH HER DEATH WAS NOT REPORTED BY THE CZECHOSLOVAK NEWS MEDIA, THE PRAGUE GRAPEVINE MORE THAN COMPENSATED FOR THIS OMISSION.

2. TWO EMBASSY OFFICERS JOINED SOME 2,500 PERSONS AT A SERVICE AT THE STRASNICE CREMATORIUM ON DECEMBER 7. THE AUTHORITIES HAD EVIDENTLY ANTICIPATED A GREATER THAN NORMAL TURN-OUT. A NUMBER OF TRAFFIC POLICE WERE ON DUTY,
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AND A FULL HOUR WAS SET ASIDE FOR THE SERVICE, COMPARED

WITH THE USUAL THIRTY MINUTE CEREMONY ALLOTTED FOR FUNERALS.

3. SOME 1000 PERSONS WERE TIGHTLY CROWDED INTO THE CHAPEL OF THE CREMATORIUM, AND ANOTHER 1500, FOR WHOM THERE WAS NO ROOM, STOOD OUTSIDE. AN HONOR GUARD, IN WWI AND FIRST REPUBLIC UNIFORMS, AS WELL AS SOME IN RAF AND FRENCH UNIFORMS, WAS PERSENT. THE EULOGY WAS DELIVERED BY THE FORMER COMMANDER OF THE CZECH LEGION. THE CROWD WAS QUIET AND ORDERLY, AND THE ONLY EVENT OF ANY POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE WAS THE APPARENTLY SPONTANEOUS SINGING OF THE FIRST REPUBLIC VERSION OF THE NATIONAL ANTHEM.

4. WHILE THE GREAT MAJORITY OF THOSE ATTENDING WERE OVER 50 YEARS OF AGE, THERE WAS A RESPECTABLE TURN-OUT OF YOUNGER PEOPLE AS WELL. A FEW OBVIOUS STB (SECRET POLICE) TYPES WERE IN EVIDENCE, BUT IT DID NOT APPEAR THAT THE AUTHORITIES WERE PARTICULARLY AFRAID OF ANY EMOTIONAL ANTI-REGIME OUTBURST.

5. THE LOCAL RADIO NEWSCAST FINALLY CARRIED A BRIEF ANNOUNCEMENT SATURDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 7, OF HANA BENESOVA'S DEATH AND CREMATION. RUDE PRAVO AND OTHER PAPERS REPORTED IT BRIEFLY ON MONDAY, DECEMBER 9.

COMMENT: AS NOTED IN THE REFERENCED AIRGRAM, MRS. BENESOVA HAD LIVED THE LAST YEARS OF HER LIFE IN VIRTUAL ANONYMITY AT THE FAMILY HOME IN SEZIMOVO USTI. DESPITE THIS, SHE CLEARLY HAD NOT BEEN FORGOTTEN BY HER CONTEMPORARIES AND SIZEABLE NUMBER OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION AS WELL. FOR MANY CZECHS WITH WHOM WE SPOKE, THE PASSING OF THE WIDOW OF BENES WAS A PARTICULARLY SAD OCCASION BECAUSE IT SYMBOLIZED ANOTHER BREAK IN THE TIES THAT BOUND CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO ITS OWN PAST. THE IMPORT OF THE REGIME'S UNWILLINGNESS TO REPORT THE DEATH UNTIL AFTER THE FUNERAL WAS NOT LOST UPON ANYBODY IN THIS COUNTRY.
PERRY

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